

THE NEW PLAY

THE HEIRESS, a play by Ruth and Augustus Goetz in two acts and seven scenes, suggested from Henry James' novel, "Washington Square." Directed by Jed Harris; setting by Raymond Sovey; produced by Fred F. Finklehoffe. At the Biltmore Theatre.

Maria	Fiona O'Shiel
Dr. Austin Sloper	Basil Rathbone
Lavinia Penniman	Patricia Collinge
Catherine Sloper	Wendy Hiller
Elizabeth Almond	Katharine Raht
Arthur Townsend	Craig Kelly
Marian Almond	Augusta Roeland
Morris Townsend	Peter Cookson
Mrs. Montgomery	Betty Linley

By BROOKS ATKINSON

With the assistance of Wendy Hiller and Basil Rathbone, a bit of Henry James came into the theatre last evening. Using "Washington Square" as their source-book, Ruth and Augustus Goetz call their drama "The Heiress," which is now on the stage of the Biltmore. Set in New York of a century ago, it is the tale of a dull and modest young lady who gives her heart to an idle fortune-seeker. Her father despises her for her stupidity. Her suitor jilts her when he discovers that the fortune would be less than he anticipated. In the end she has the revenge of refusing him when he comes again. But the revenge is tiny compensation for the desolation of an old maid's life.

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As things have been going on Broadway recently, "The Heiress" is a refreshing excursion into intelligence and good taste. But the fact is that the authors have had a good deal of difficulty in making a play out of undramatic material. For "Washington Square" is a story of intangibles, told with an ironic reticence that scrupulously avoids big scenes. By calling their play "The Heiress," the authors indicate that they are not attempting a literal transcription of the Henry James novel. But neither have they succeeded in writing an independent work of art. For "The Heiress" begins to lose its mastery of the theme at the end of the first act when it puts the father, suitor and daughter in a gaudy scene; and it has nothing much more than well-bred flourishes of theatre to strew through the second act. It is difficult to make a stupid woman the heroine of an interesting drama. Probably that is the basic infirmity of this elusive play.

Nor has Miss Hiller succeeded in the task that has defeated the authors. She is an admirable actress, highly esteemed in America as well as England, and well-remembered for her acting in "Love on the Dole" and "Pygmalion." But in an effort to contribute some dramatic contrast to



Wendy Hiller

the plain part of Catherine Sloper, she has made her a rather painfully abnormal person in the early half of the drama, and her composure toward the end of it is not exhilarating. Nothing Miss Hiller has been able to do alters a general impression that poor Catherine is better off inside the discreet, impeccable pages of Henry James.

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As Dr. Sloper, Catherine's keenly-inhuman parent, Mr. Rathbone has one of his most actable parts. He plays it perfectly with irony and arrogance. Patricia Collinge is playing Lavinia Penniman with the intolerable romanticism of a silly character, which is precisely what the part requires. As the fickle suitor, Peter Cookson is giving an attractive performance of a part that sought to be a trifle more sinister and cunning. Something should be said in praise of Betty Linley's acting of a genteel widow who behaves with pride in a scene that is stacked against her.

To house this fable of manners and a mercenary, Raymond Sovey has designed an imposing drawing-room, attractively furnished. But the nature of the materials in the Henry James novel has sorely tried the resourcefulness of Jed Harris, as the director, and of the authors as well. The heroine cannot be acted; she can only be acted against. The story cannot be dramatized.